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SUBJECT: GOI ESTABLISHES COMMISION ON ILLEGAL BEDOUIN SETTLEMENTS IN THE NEGEV

1.(C) BEGIN SUMMARY: On January 18 the Israeli Cabinet voted to approve the outline of the Goldberg Committee Report on the issue of illegal settlements by Bedouin citizens in the Negev Desert. The report recommended that the GOI legitimize about 46 unrecognized Bedouin villages and encourage Bedouin whose settlements cannot be lawfully recognized to relocate to the northern Negev. The Cabinet voted to form a commission responsible for finding means to implement the report's recommendations. Ehud "Udi" Praver, the PM's manager of policy and planning for minority communities, was appointed head of the commission. The PM asked Praver to present the commission's findings to the Cabinet within six months. Aiman Saif, Director of the Authority for the Economic Development of the Arab Sector in the Prime Minister's Office, characterized the plan to relocate Bedouin as very good. He was not optimistic about its success, however. Saif told econoff that he did not believe that there would be enough Bedouins living in illegal settlements willing to take advantage of the GOI's economic incentives in exchange for relocation. Regardless of the outcome, the report's recommendations and the GOI's commitment to act on them are major advances in solving a historical problem in Israel. END SUMMARY

THE GOLDBERG REPORT

2.(U) On December 11 the Committee for the Regulation of the Bedouin Settlements in the Negev, chaired by retired Supreme Court Justice Eliezer Goldberg, presented the Ministry of Housing and Construction with its findings. The report recommended that the GOI recognize about 46 Bedouin villages in the Negev desert. The villages, which are currently considered illegal, house approximately 62,000 people. Most of the illegal settlements' population holds Israeli citizenship. The Goldberg report also recommended that the state assist Bedouin whose settlements cannot be lawfully recognized in relocating to the northern Negev. While the finding generally called for measures that would "prevent the perpetuation of (the Bedouin,s) unbearable state," it also called for strict enforcement of any future infraction of Israel's construction laws. It recommended that the state establish an independent, public corporation to regulate Bedouin settlements.

PM FORMS COMMISSION TO IMPLEMENT REPORT,S RECOMMENDATIONS

3.(U) During the January 18 Cabinet meeting, PM Olmert called the need for finding a solution to the problem "important" and said, "we are expressing the true feelings which Israel has for all of its citizens, including its Arab citizens, who are an inseparable part of the nation, in order to take care of the issues which have vexed, troubled and marred their lives for many years."

4.(U) Together with Lirit Sarphus, a former educator in Jerusalem, Praver outlined the plan he intends to develop in the next six months. He suggested a defined, concentrated plan of dispersal, a defined time-frame in which to do it, and he suggested that financial incentives would be necessary to encourage complete communities to reach a compromise on relocation. Furthermore, Praver said a concentrated evacuation plan of any illegal structures be implemented after the defined time period in which to reconcile expires.

PROBABILITY OF RELOCATION REMAINS IN DOUBT

5.(C) In a conversation with the director of the Authority for the Economic Development of the Arab Sector in the Prime Minister's office, Aiman Saif, himself an Arab-Israeli, told econoff that prospects for the plan's success remain in doubt due mostly to the size of the economic incentives the GOI is willing to commit to Bedouin who agree to relocate. He praised the report's recommendation to recognize illegal settlements and said that the measures to be implemented by the committee would undoubtedly have a positive effect on the dire economic situation of the Bedouin. He focused on the relocation plan, however, as the primary difficulty in resolving the problem. Saif said that the Ministry of Finance (FM) had vetoed the original formula for calculating the economic incentive proposed by the PM's office in favor of one that would provide a lesser incentive.

Representatives of the Bedouin were divided in their opinion on the size of the incentive ultimately approved by the FM, said Saif. Some accepted it as enough, but many felt it was too little to compel them to leave their current homes. Saif said that the GOI hoped that the Bedouin originally opposed would eventually begin to concede and follow others who would more quickly accept the incentive once relocation begins. Saif was not optimistic, however, that this would succeed. When asked about the possibilities that the committee would be dissolved or its plan ignored by a new Israeli government come February or March, Saif said he believed the new government, whatever its composition, would likely support the initiative and allow it to be carried out.

6.(U) A press statement released by the Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages (RCUV) harshly criticized the Goldberg report, saying its recommendations did "not meet the minimum demands of the people." The RCUV condemned the commission for never explicitly recognizing the right of the Negev Arabs to the land they occupy, and called the recommendations the "latest ploy to complete (the) policy of confiscation and seizure of Bedouin land that began in 1948." The RCUV emphasized its position that recognition of these rights is the only just solution for the plight of the Bedouin. The press release stated unequivocally that the RCUV would oppose the recommendations of the Goldberg report.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND COMMENT

7.(U) The Bedouin hold the lowest socioeconomic status in Israel, forming the poorest segment of Israel's already depressed Arab sector. Integrating them into mainstream society has proved extremely difficult due to their migratory patterns and poor educational status. Their ability to organize or bargain collectively is minimal and they have not been historically successful in advocating for their interests in the government. The GOI has failed to provide Bedouin villages with basic services such as education, electricity, water, telephone, or sewerage and the majority of the population lives under the poverty line. While many left-wing activists in Israel have applauded the findings of the Goldberg report, right-wing opinions in opposition have also been voiced in the media. The right wing draws parallels between the situation of Jewish settlers in the territories and that of the Bedouins within green-line Israel. According to the press, some right-wing spokesmen have called for the expansion of Jewish settlements in the territories in exchange for the legalization of the Bedouins' settlements in the Negev.

8.(U) Bedouin groups express disappointment at the prospect of having to relocate and lose their rights to what they claim is their land. There are also disagreements among them regarding the fairness of the economic incentives offered by the GOI to relocate. Nevertheless, the report and the commission that it has created can be viewed as a positive turn of events for Bedouin rights. The GOI is interested in resolving several land disputes and land use issues in the northern Negev that the ever-expanding, illegal Bedouin communities complicate.

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